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Being Tenacious

Unica Viramontes, safeguarding the Laboratory like a pro

While growing up with an older brother who played football for the University of New Mexico and quizzed her on sports trivia incessantly, Unica Viramontes (née Gonzales)

developed a passion for sports all her own. Even though she rarely saw women commentators on TV, she felt she was destined to be an ESPN broadcaster.

After graduating from Española Valley High School, Unica headed to the University of California, Berkeley to study mass communications. She became a loyal fan of the San Jose Sharks ice hockey team.

Surprisingly, she traded in her sports broadcasting dream after graduation in 2003, when market conditions in her field were grim and an unexpected door opened.

As a high school student, she had worked under the guidance of a trailblazer at Los Alamos National Laboratory, the only female manager in the Security Division's at the time, **Sharon Eklund**. In college Unica was kept on casual status and worked from school with Sharon through the UC Office of the President in Oakland. That connection is the unexpected door that opened after graduation, inviting her to use her communication skills in the enigmatic Security organization.

"Stars aligned for me," she says.



CAPTION: Unica takes her family to Abiquiu, her hometown, for cattle brandings twice a year. Her father, Miguel Gonzales (pictured second from right), is a rancher and retired educator; her mother, Cecilia Gonzales, is a retired office administrator from LANL.

Unica was working at Bode's Mercantile and General Store one summer when a family friend encouraged her to apply to the LANL high school co-op program.

Part of an elite team

At the Lab, Unica doesn't need a golden voice for live broadcasts. But her varied roles and responsibilities over the past 20 years have had her doing things any talented sportscaster can do well: analysis, statistics, sideline reports, play-by-play team strategy and light humor.

Little by little, she has gained insights into this tense, closely watched contest between those who protect national security secrets and nuclear material at the Laboratory and their unrelenting adversaries — spies and terrorists who seek to break through all defenses.

In 2016 she was the first LANL woman to be named Security Division leader. And this May, she became the first LANL woman named senior director of the Defense Security Program (DFS). Her program, which includes the Security and the Safeguards divisions, is responsible for preventing and neutralizing threats.

“Unica is an incredible servant and value-based leader who is the perfect person to lead this exceptional mission-focused organization,” says **Michael Hazen**, the associate Laboratory director for Environment, Safety, Health, Quality, Safeguards and Security.



It's a big job, which includes things like safeguarding special nuclear material, property, information and personnel. The program also provides expertise, support and guidance in all areas of security — from classification to personnel security, and especially nuclear material control and accountability.

"Our threats are constantly evolving," Unica says. "We have to anticipate what the next threat is going to be and how to stop it."

A model program in the Department of Energy/National Nuclear Security Administration complex, DFS gets tapped for expertise and assistance, sometimes loaning out its subject matter experts to other institutions. Over the past eight years, individuals and teams have garnered accolades from NNSA headquarters. Unica was part of a team that was recognized this year for its trailblazing effort to counter drones (unmanned aircraft systems).

Today, Unica's program is about half protective force members (Centerra Los Alamos) and half LANL employees, 630 in all. And it's about to get much bigger.

Sideways and upwards

When Unica participated in the Lab's high school co-op program, she liked working in the Security Division but it bothered her there was only one female manager. "So, looking at that, I didn't think it was a career path for me. It was mostly males and ex-military personnel," she recalls.

"But after I graduated from college, I had a job offer in security and I saw the opportunity as a challenge: Let's see if I can move up in this male-dominated field."

She did it! But how?

By working sideways and upwards.

First, she used her communications degree to develop articles, websites and training materials about security issues for Lab employees. Next, she waded into the deep waters of this field, as a security officer, security assessment specialist, program specialist and program manager.

"I knew that in order to do that, I needed to learn *all* of security. I made conscious choices to switch jobs — even if they were lateral and I wasn't getting any more pay — just so I could learn all there was about security," Unica says.

Handing off a pass

Thanks to mentors who believed in her, she was given incredible opportunities. She learned about tactical security and how the political system in Washington, D.C., works.

One of Unica's goals in her new position is to clear a similar path so others can follow it without the bushwhacking her journey entailed. Lab students often get stuck in personnel security because they don't have a security clearance to move into other areas.

"I want to change that and expand the student experience to all areas of security," Unica says. "I was able to do that and it helped me get the knowledge and ability to become a leader in the organization."

A growing mission



*CAPTION: Patrolling the Lab 24/7 are BearCats armed with a multibarrel machine gun capable of firing 3,000 rounds per minute. Entrances to TA-55, LANL's plutonium science and engineering facility, are protected by guards, guns, gates and working dogs. Security personnel, many who are ex-military, regularly train using both lethal and nonlethal tactics. The Lab uses drones for surveillance. Watch video: <https://youtu.be/t5dQy3PXWBI>
https://www.lanl.gov/science/NSS/issue2_2012/story5full.shtml*

Los Alamos produced the first full qualified plutonium pit since the Rocky Flats Plant near Denver closed in 2003, proving the nation hadn't lost the ability to make atomic bombs. And this January, the Lab requalified a first production unit of a plutonium pit that was originally manufactured at Rocky Flats, a crucial step forward in extending the life of the B-61 as the B-61-12.

Now a key player in a congressionally mandated nuclear weapons modernization plan, Los Alamos is preparing the way to make no fewer than 30 plutonium cores a year for the aging stockpile.

Beefing up our defense game

To help the Lab meet its new assignment — resuming production of plutonium cores by 2030 — Unica is helping the Lab strategize a game plan. From a Defense Security Program perspective, several widespread changes will be essential to the success of expanded plutonium operations.

“We know how to protect nuclear materials,” Unica says confidently.

Comprehensive infrastructure improvements to the existing Plutonium Facility at TA-55 will enable the plutonium manufacturing initiative, while Unica aims to provide a higher level of security beyond TA-55 to protect pit production work from adversaries.

Redrawing the end zone

Consider this: More than 19,000 football fields could fit within the Los Alamos campus, a U.S. Department of Energy-owned property with 1,280 facilities. How do you fortify a place this spread out?

“Our biggest challenge here is the fact that we're an open campus. If you go to any other national laboratory, there is a distinct perimeter. Unless you have a badge, you're not getting in,” Unica explains. “At Los Alamos, we have public highways passing through our property. Working with Lab leadership and [DOE] headquarters, we need to think of a way to close our campus while still allowing the public to traverse it.”

Part of the plan is to button down parts of the Lab's unwieldy campus. Solutions currently being discussed include the creation of a new bypass road that would connect Pajarito Ski Area directly to public roads, thus creating a more secure perimeter around Lab property. Another solution would relocate badging and shipping/receiving to a convenient location along the Truck Route, drastically reducing truck traffic through TA-03.

“The threats today in the world all revolve around ‘soft targets,’” Unica says, referring to places that aren’t defended at high levels like such ‘hard targets’ as the White House, airports and TA-55.

Another aspect of the plan is to double the size of the armed protective force, she says, and hiring is already underway.

Communication + trust = more secure plays



In an organization dominated by men and ex-military personnel, Unica has earned a reputation for getting teams to flourish and accomplish difficult things. **Bill Mairson**, the chief operating officer for Environment, Safety, Health, Quality, Safeguards, and Security, describes her as “tenacious.”

Unica says her management style is based on what she learned from extraordinary role models throughout her LANL career. “Always be humble and kind” is a mantra she holds onto from former Associate Director **Mike Lansing**, who showed what it looks like to value relationships and be a champion for your team.

“The success of her team members is her success. She continually works to ensure the ideas and suggestions of her team are heard,” says Bill, who has worked with her for the past five years.

Unica keeps her door open, even though some days it means she doesn’t get as much done because people drop in. “If something goes wrong, they can come to me,” she says.

She keeps the focus on what’s going right on her team through LANL monetary awards, handwritten notes and face-to-face conversations. “Unica seems to have an endless supply of energy as she is always moving at 110 mph. But to her credit, she is also focused on continually training and stretching her leadership team so that they grow and develop professionally,” Bill says.

Unica sets a golden tone. She has trained herself not to overact to problem situations but rather focus on the required action. And in meetings, she has a way of wiping stress off people’s brows. When she sees employees walk into meetings with serious faces, she challenges herself to help them lighten up, find humor and laugh without losing sight of the gravity of a situation.

During the 1990s, when an espionage inquiry and other security issues rocked the Lab, Unica was impressed with how her group leader **Kevin Leifheit** faced adversity head on before anyone gave him direction to and kept morale from degrading through his upbeat personality. He would tell his staff, “Go get it done and I’ll back you up if there are roadblocks.”

Unica says she drew strength from Kevin’s example when she was pulled into an effort to improve Nuclear Material Control & Accountability (NMC&A), a situation where finger-pointing between the program and operations was thwarting progress. “A lot of folks here left because they couldn’t handle the pressure,” she says.

Although Unica is conscious that naysayers abound as she takes on more responsibility at the Lab, she is undaunted. She says she likes the people she works with and feels she has steadfast support from her superiors.

“My favorite part of the job is not knowing what’s going to happen. It’s always something different. The moment you say, ‘Wow, that could never happen,’ it happens. I guess I thrive in chaos,” she says. “I was never in the military, but to me, this is my service to the nation.”

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